

STRENGTHENING IDENTIFICATION PROCEDURES

Imagine you are driving home from work. Along your way, you decide to stop at a convenience store to pick up a beverage for your after-dinner run. As you merge back out into traffic, you see flashing lights behind you. You are being pulled over.



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You pull the car to the side of the road. The officer approaches and asks for your license and registration. You don't know what you did in error, but you wait, trying to piece together why you were pulled over and dreading a traffic ticket.

After a few minutes, the officer returns to the car and asks you to step out of the vehicle. You step out as asked. He then informs you that there is an Amber Alert issued for the arrest of a suspect in a possible kidnapping and not only do you fit the description of the suspect, but your vehicle was seen in the area around the time the child went missing.

You tell the officer you didn't do it and explain your whereabouts, but you are arrested on the spot anyway. At the police station, you are questioned and eventually released on the condition that you participate in a police lineup.

You return to the precinct early the next morning for a standard lineup procedure. Because of your innocence, you do not seek the advice of an attorney. You trust that the process is transparent and fair. There's no other way this could turn out except for complete exoneration (and hopefully an apology to you and your family). To your dismay, during the police lineup you are identified as the suspect.

You are arrested for a kidnapping that you know nothing about. You get released on bail, and anxiously await the trial to set your record straight.

During the trial, the judge reviews the case, and questions the validity of the lineup procedure used to identify you as the suspect. It turns out, the lineup procedure in



which you were identified as the suspect, did not follow new state policies implemented to improve the accuracy of eyewitness identification. The newer approach ensures that the administrator of the lineup does not know who the suspect is. This is to keep the administrator from influencing the eyewitness to pick the suspect. The lineup procedure should be recorded (ideally with video), so that it can be checked and verified later. These new “double blind” procedures reduce errors and false identifications.

In your case, law enforcement did not follow these recommendations.

The lineup that led to your identification as a suspect is not allowed into evidence. The judge’s decision followed new judicial procedures in your state. These procedures are based in part on recommendations informed by SBE-research on false eye-witness identification.

You are acquitted.

False eyewitness identifications are the leading factor in wrongful convictions in the United States. As of 2018, 26 states have implemented double-blind lineup procedures stemming from SBE-funded research.

Your life. Our work. SBE.

This social and behavioral science story and the benefit to many who would have otherwise been falsely identified were made possible by research funded by the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate of the National Science Foundation. Researchers in this field, including Margaret Bull Kovera, have studied many aspects of eyewitness identification. False identifications harm the falsely accused, but they also allow actual perpetrators to go free. SBE-funded research has found that when law enforcement officials follow specific procedures, false identifications are reduced improving outcomes for many Americans.

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